

Of budget cuts and union officials

A great teacher of mine once said that when reading history, and revisiting the atrocious and stupid events that comprise it, there were really only two sensible things we could do: "you can either laugh or cry."

I often wonder which of the two options future generations will choose when they study us.

It's now 2011, and the waves of the 2008 economic crisis continue to crash as hard as ever over the heads of working people the world over.

The latest waves of budget cuts across the country have sparked major condemnation from community organizations and labor unions, leading in some states to demonstrations the size and militancy of which we have not seen in years.

The fight against austerity rages on, but victories have been notably scarce. News of defeats continue to pour in.

Workers in States such as Massachusetts, Connecticut, Oregon, California, New York, Illinois, Washington, Hawaii, Minnesota, Maryland and New Hampshire are facing major attacks on their livelihoods. They also share another thing in common: they all have Democrats as their governors.

The Democrats and the Unions:

In Washington State, working families may soon be feeling the effects of the recently approved 2011-2013 state budget, 90% of which, the Washington Budget and Policy Center reported, consisted of cuts.

On the chopping block are \$179 million in pay cuts for k-12 employees, \$129 million in basic health plans for low-income adults, \$179 million in assistance to disabled adults, and a 10% decrease in hours of care for people with developmental disabilities.

The millions in cuts simply add insult to injury after a 3% pay cut state workers took in december.

In Ohio, AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka urges union members to get out the vote Nov. 2. All of these cuts, its worth noting, were passed by a Democratic Party controlled legislature. The irony is, union leadership supported them – to the tune of some hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Highlighting the absurdity of this unflinching financial support was the 2008 court case launched by the Washington Federation of State Employees (WFSE) against governor Christine Gregoire.

The WFSE sued the Governor in December of 2008 for her suggestion that pay raises, which had been previously won in negotiations, be dropped to help address the state's financial shortfall.

Because the state had the right to retroactively refuse any contract which became "financially unfeasible," workers might be forced to take yet more cuts.

"The contracts," insisted Gregoire's budget director, Victor Moore, "concluded prior to the global financial market crisis in October and the November revenue forecast reducing state income by \$1.9 billion."

The union, however, maintained "that the state was aware of the downturn of the economy and worsening economic conditions, which is why the final contracts 'were the lowest ever negotiated by the parties'."

We don't know how much of their members' money the WFSE spent on that court battle against Governor Gregoire. We do know, however, how much they donated to support Governor Gregoire's election to office in the first place: about \$200,000 in donations to the DGA.

Laugh or cry.

We're Losing:

There is a war being waged in the United States. It is a war between its owners – those who own the land, the banks, the factories and the supermarkets – and everyone else.

In case you hadn't noticed, the owners are winning.

Our failure to defend even our most basic rights – particularly in Wisconsin – has gotten to such a point, in fact, that even the conservative leadership of our business unions have had to comment on it.

Remarking on the labor movement's failed strategy this week, president of the AFL-CIO, Richard Trumka, gave a remarkable speech to National Nurses United.

In it, he admitted that the strategy of relying on lobbying and elections as a means of defending ourselves was bankrupt; and, he added, "'I've had a Snootful of this shit!'"

"We can't simply build the power of any political party or any candidate. For too long we've been left after the election holding a canceled check and asking someone to pay attention to us."

Whether or not he has any intention of correcting this error in strategy has yet to be seen – but I'm not holding my breath.

The observation, nonetheless, is valid, and until we internalize the lesson, we will continue to find ourselves on the losing end of politics as usual.

For the full, original article, feel free to [visit the Trial by Fire](#).